Relevance as Social Matrix of Attention in Alfred Schutz

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Attention is a critical faculty in contemporary Western societies. What is surprising is the fact that attention has been mainly analyzed as an individual phenomenon. Scientific research that treats attention exclusively on the individual level simplifies an enormously complex situation. Instead, according to the idea defended in this essay, one cannot think of attention and perception without regard for cultural conventions and social norms. This article therefore proposes to investigate attention precisely in its social dimension. In particular, the specific objective is to highlight the contribution Alfred Schutz's theory of systems of relevance can give to the understanding of the social mechanisms that regulate attention. In order to demonstrate the viability of the Schutzian proposal, here are discussed some recent perspectives that explore the mechanisms of the social regulation of attention. The article will briefly revisit these contributions that explicitly investigate intersubjective and collective attention, and will focus especially on the proposals of Eviatar Zerubavel and Yves Citton. Then is analyzed the role of attention in the theoretical edifice of Schutz, to focus on the relationship between attention and systems of relevance.

1. Introduction

To affirm that attention is a critical faculty in contemporary Western societies is by now a truism, almost a banality: in a world where the fundamental economic mechanisms essentially operate in real time on a global level; where virtually any event can be digitally reproduced and distributed in the network and thus become a possible object of experience on the part of anyone who can connect to the internet; where we have access to a quantity of information and experience that definitely exceeds our individual ability to manage them; where an incredible quantity of goods is offered daily to our attention; where diagnoses are formulated that certify an attention disorder; where a notice of our mobile devices (an email, a message, a call) can always reclaim our attention; in a world configured thusly, we can say that our ability to pay attention to certain stimuli (objects, human beings, events, actions) rather than others that are potentially accessible is in fact fundamental.

Yet, beyond this specific historical juncture, we should note how attention is still pervasive in our individual and collective life. To realize this ourselves

just think about the fact that every act of our mental life and all our actions are somehow attentionally modulated. Attention is pervasive, a sort of "basso continuo" of human activity (Depraz 2004: 12). It is not a coincidence then that attention has been an object of study central to Western thought. To outline the overall history of attention as a topic for analysis in Western civilization would imply reconstruction of the traces of a millennial path. What is amazing, however, is the fact that attention has been mainly analyzed as an individual phenomenon (Desideri 2011: 49). Traditionally interest has mainly been directed at the means by which a subject (often male, Western and adult) directs attention to this or that object, to the number of simultaneous objects or operations to which he can simultaneously pay attention and so on. The idea that attention is separate from culture is based on a fictitious conflict between nature and culture, and thus a kind of bifurcation between the natural world (pre-cultural, of which have access through perception) and the cultural world, which instead is bound by our cultural conventions. Instead according to the definition that we want to defend in this essay one cannot think of attention and perception without regard for cultural conventions and social norms (Parsons 1988).

In this article, however, I propose to investigate attention precisely in its social dimension. I am convinced that attention should be understood primarily as a cultural and social phenomenon in order to try to grasp, at least in part, its complexity. Although Alfred Schutz analyzes the problem of attention and of relevance from an isolated subject, the social is still inherently present. In particular, the specific objective of this paper is to highlight the contribution the theory of systems of relevance of Alfred Schutz can give to the understanding of the social mechanisms that regulate attention. In the first section we will try to return briefly to the different definitions that one can follow in order to study intersubjective and social attention. In order to demonstrate the viability of the Schutzian proposal, we will discuss some recent perspectives that explore the mechanisms of the social regulation of attention. In particular, we will devote more space to the contributions of Eviatar Zerubavel and Yves Citton that, from very different perspectives, analyzed attention as a collective phenomenon. In the next section, we will recall Schutz's theory of systems of relevance. Finally, we will attempt to identify within this theory some theoretical elements useful for clarifying the nature of social attention.

2. Attention as a social phenomenon

We have just said that, unlike most studies on the subject, we want to investigate attention as an eminently social phenomenon. Scientific research that treats attention exclusively on the individual level simplifies an enormously

complex situation. As a first step to better define our field of inquiry we analytically distinguish three different levels. At the first level attention detects in so far as aggregate attention of several subjects on a single object, or as collective attention turned towards an object. The second level is that in which the purely intersubjective dimension emerges: my attention is driven by another actually present subject with whom I share the same attentional scene. Finally, we can analyze attention, even at the individual level, as disposition anchored in a social context that then poses norms, constraints and the potentiality to individual attention. The three levels are, of course, interrelated and interdependent; the boundaries are also not as clear as we have presented. In any case, we, through Schutz, will be interested primarily in the third. Yet, precisely because of this interdependence, we cannot help but revisit the others, albeit very briefly.

2.1 The collective attention

The first level, that of collective attention, is probably the most investigated in sociology. Here, the interest is pinned on those events that have the ability to channel the attention of a large amount of subjects. In societies such as ours, whose dominant sectors potentially work in real time, one could give many examples. We can think of the constant and cyclical repetition of media events followed worldwide: the Olympics, the World Cup, Oscar night. Or even unique events that mark the memory and collective representations of entire generations: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the attack on the twin towers, and so on. Or finally, the fact that the very functioning of the means of mass communication is based on measuring the amount of collective attention (share) that the public grants to media products. That of the mass media, however, is merely one example, certainly macroscopic, of how certain events are able to capture the attention of various subjects and thus mark also their representations and collective memory. At this level, the fundamental question concerns the study of the mechanisms of construction of collective relevance and the identification of social groups that are able to control their operation. No wonder then that today the interest of research on collective attention focuses mainly on the media and their ability to determine the politics of attention (Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

2.2 Joint attention

At the level that we called intersubjective, attention is studied with respect to an interaction between individuals actually present. In psychology the expression joint attention is used to indicate an interactive situation in which

the adult and the child coordinate their attention on a third object. The child's ability to follow the direction and focus of attention of the adult develops around the age of nine months. In other words the child begins to follow the gaze of the adult and focus their attention on a common element. At this stage, the interactions between the child and the adult pass more and more from a dyadic to a triadic structure, in which the child must learn to coordinate its attention and action with the attention and action of its partner in the interaction (Moore and Dunham 1995). Around the first year of age, children begin to use deictic gestures, the prototype of which is pointing. Despite its apparent simplicity, the deictic gesture has great communicative power (Tomasello 2008). Joint attention is therefore based on the child's ability to coordinate its attention and action on the object and on the adults. In turn the other coordinates its attention and action on the child and the object. Already at this level therefore, a first form of cooperative communication of a prelinguistic nature is achieved. The child, in a situation of shared attention, can understand and act in the world along with and through others. We can then start to give more validity to the claim that attention can be read as a social phenomenon: already at this level in fact, *"How I perceive the world, and what salience I find there, –* writes Shaun Gallagher *– are to some extent put in place by the gaze and the action of the others. My action with respect to the world, and with respect to the others, emerges in the context set by those other"* (Gallagher 2010: 116 emphasis added). Consequently, the attention of others structures both the perception of the world and the salience of objects present in it. It is therefore through the attention of others that I can identify which elements are most important in my perceptual field. It is precisely for this reason, that attention must be investigated even in its contextual dimension. The interaction that occurs between child and adult is placed in a very complex network of social relations. If we expand the breadth of the context of interest, we move to the last level we identified previously. Let's move on then to analyze the social matrix of attention.

2.3 The social matrix of attention

The contributions that we propose to place in this category investigate the social conditions of exercising attention. The premise behind this approach is that attention is exercised on the basis of social norms shared socially in a socially structured context. The aim of this essay is, we said, to highlight the contribution that Schutz's theory of systems of relevance can give to the understanding of attention as a social phenomenon. We've already anticipated that, before turning to a discussion of this theory, we will revisit two recent theoretical proposals that precisely analyze attention from its social structure.

The first is that of Eviatar Zerubavel who continues under the banner of cognitive sociology[1]; the second perspective that we propose to revisit is instead that of the *Ecologie de l'attention* as expressed in a recent book by Yves Citton (Citton 2014).

2.3.1 Cognitive Sociology

The proposal of Zerubavel is to analyze attention within a sociology of thinking that elects as its object of privileged investigation that which pertains to *sociomental*. According to this perspective, our cognitive faculties depend not only on their biological configuration. Nor would it be correct to analyze them solely on the basis of the specific individual. The scope of research is thus distinct from that of cognitive individualism, based on the idea of the isolated individual whose thoughts could not be other than the product of his/her own personal experiences. But it is also distinguished from cognitive universalism, the dominant perspective in modern cognitive science. These in fact assume a "universal, *human* mind" and are dedicated to researching "the universal foundations of human cognition" (Zerubavel 1997: 3). Instead, according to cognitive sociology, it is possible to analyze our cognitive faculties through a different formulation. Zerubavel distinguishes three different levels of analysis in light of the fact that "we think both (a) as individuals, (b) as social beings, and (c) as human beings" (Zerubavel 1997: 5). Obviously, cognitive sociology focuses on the second of these levels, the *sociomental* to be precise, to demonstrate *"the social fondation of cognition in general"* (Zerubavel 1997: 116 emphasis added). That is, we live in *Social Mindscapes*, to borrow the title of the book-manifesto of this approach, that have a historical and conventional nature.

    The idea that there might exist an isolated individual is rejected in favor of the thesis that our cognitive faculties are hinged in a network of social relations that substantiate and make them possible. With respect to attention, this means that the image of the subject who directs his attention guided solely by his own will is incomplete and misleading: our attention is guided by rules that govern it. The study of attention within this perspective thus aims to emphasize the great cultural variability of the ways in which we manage our attention. That is attention is drawn by certain objects, rather than others, also because we have been socialized to certain norms of attending. As Zerubavel wrote in a brief essay in 1993, "it is unmistakably social 'rules of irrelevance'

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[1] However the term is to be understood in a different sense from that which is attributed to Cicourel in *Cognitive sociology* (Cicourel 1974).

that make us perceive certain parts of social situations as mere background that can be practically ignored. Separating the relevant from the irrelevant is not a spontaneous individual act but, rather, a *normative* social act" (Zerubavel 1993: 401). The selection of the perceptual field, in which we operate through attention, is therefore driven not only by universal laws of human perception, but also by purely social norms (Zerubavel 1993: 398). Attention as "social gate of consciousness"(Zerubavel 1997: 35–52), determines what goes into the consciousness: a significant part of that which we perceive is guided by social norms of relevance and irrelevance.[2] There are therefore social norms of focusing that guide the determination of that which is not worthy of attention, but also that which should be explicitly ignored. That is we can identify the rules that guide our attention, but also social norms that invite us to deliberately ignore things that we actually notice (Zerubavel 2006).

The recent *Hidden in Plain Sight* (Zerubavel 2015) is dedicated to increasing the issues raised in previous studies with regard to attention. In this text, attention is investigated departing from a metaphor that Zerubavel had already introduced in previous studies: "*Attending* something in a focused manner – he writes in *Social Mindscape* – entails mentally disengaging it (as a 'figure') from its surrounding 'ground', which we essentially ignore" (Zerubavel 1997: 35). Zerubavel therefore revisits the theory of the perception of Gestalt for the study of attention precisely because that which is recognized as a "figure" corresponds to the part of the world to which we pay attention, while "the background" is the unattended part of our world. The application of the figures-and-background model of perception is by Zerubavel extended far beyond the visual perception: "to non-visual (auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile) forms of perception as well as to altogether non-sensory modes of cognition" (Zerubavel 2015: 7). Unlike the Gestalt theorists however, Zerubavel emphasizes the conventional nature of that which we identify as figure or as background: nothing is intrinsically figure (and therefore relevant) or background (and therefore irrelevant). We distinguish that which is figure or background as our attention is socially "deliniated" (Zerubavel 2015: 8). That is we learn where to direct our attention through attentional socialization. Attentional socialization that is also revealed in the learning of a language (Zerubavel 2015: 63-65). The words somehow prestructure our perception as they provide a grid of relevance to our field of perception.

It is possible to study the conventional nature of attention through a survey of our socio-attentional patterns, or models of management of attention that are shared by some groups of subjects but not others. Attentional pat-

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[2] Zerubavel here makes explicit reference not only to Bateson and Goffman (with whom he studied at the University of Pennsylvania) but also to Schutz.

terns vary both in time and between cultures or within the same culture. Western culture, for example, stimulates a perception of objects of the "field independence" type, that is which tend to focus on objects in their individuality as separate from the context in which they are inserted: "this remarkably distinctive feature of Western civilization is in fact a product of its emphasis on independence. Indeed, cultures that promote social interdependence tend to adopt a somewhat less-focused attentional style than those promoting social independence" (Zerubavel 2015: 54-55). According to this hypothesis, therefore, Westerners would be more likely to let emerge individual specificity as a figure and to relegate the background the relationships that connect the object to its environment. Conversely, for Easterners these relationships represent the figure of their perceptual field.

2.3.2 Ecology of Attention

The other approach we briefly revisit here is of Yves Citton. Despite the theoretical reference points of Yves Citton and Eviatar Zerubavel being very different, they both share a distance from the paradigm that confines attention exclusively to the scope of the individual. According to Yves Citton, the first operation to be accomplished to bring the analysis of attention out from an individualist paradigm is to place it on a historical level. Looking at attention from a historical point of view offers at least two important advantages. On the one hand, it shows the different ways of standardization of attention in different historical periods, and on the other it makes it possible to identify periods in which the management of attention becomes a real social problem (Crary 2001). The second theoretical operation consists of inverting the individualist paradigm of attention, the order in which attention is traditionally thought about, in common sense as well as in the traditional sciences. If in fact we follow an individualist perspective, the starting point is the individual attention. Collective attention is nothing more than a mere aggregate of individual phenomenon, the sum of individual acts. Yves Citton sets us out to follow the opposite path, or to read attention as "*an essentially collective phenomenon:* I' am careful about that to which *we* collectively pay attention" (Citton 2014: 39 emphasis added). Therefore, according to the *ecology of attention* to also understand individual attention we must always take into consideration the ecological context in which individuals are placed. Attention, as a subjective act, is to be framed within collective "attentional regimes" that guide, bind and manage the ways in which individuals pay attention.[3] According

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[3] For this concept Citton refers to the work of Dominique Boullier (Boullier 2009).

to this ecological approach, attention is a fundamental mechanism for the adaptation of the organism to the environment. In this key, the relatedness of attention is to be emphasized above all: it is primarily an interaction (Citton 2014: 45). According to Citton, collective attention must be considered a priority over that of the individual: "The attention I pay to what surrounds me and that which I encounter is sentenced, at least initially, to follow the routes pioneered by the images and discourses that circulate around us and in us. [...] *Through me, it's always us / nous who pay attention*" (Citton 2014: 55). An affirmation that perhaps is more evident today, if we think about the fact that we live in an environment of intense media coverage: according to Yves Citton, it is difficult for us to escape the representations conveyed by the media and thus to the structuring of relevance they build.

Attention should therefore be understood in relation to its operation in the social environment. Thus one of the first characteristics that emerges is the fact that my attention is magnetically attracted by the objects to which others direct their attention. Precisely because of the importance of attention with respect to our survival, it should not be surprising that we, as social beings, tend to notice that to which others pay attention. A principle which probably has its ontogenetic origin in the development of joint attention, which we briefly discussed above, and that today arrives at its maximum evidence thanks to the means of mass communication.[4] Somehow for us it is important to pay attention to that which others pay attention. Yves Citton proposes the formulation of the principle of selective collectivization: attention has a dual function; on the one hand it ensures *a functional adaptation to the environment through a pre-selection of what interests us*, and on the other it simultaneously makes sure that there is a kind of automatic collective composition of individual desires (Citton 2014: 59). Obviously, here Yves Citton doesn't aboslutely allude to some sort of harmonization of interests, but rather to the fact that through a spontaneous alignment of our individual attention to that of others, we share the same systems of relevance, to use a Schutzian term that we will discuss better in the next section.

For Zerubavel and also for Citton, perception is anchored in selection mechanisms that have their origin at the collective level. Our attention is therefore guided by networks of salience that are the precipitate of knowledge accumulated by previous generations. These *clichés*, operate as sensory filters that allow us to quickly select the relevant elements from our environment. "These *clichés* – writes Yves Citton – provide the basic tools that our 'auto-

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[4] We note, only in passing, that the approach of Yves Citton hollows out the apocalyptic criticism of the media as weapons of mass distraction, while collecting the critical scope. The incredible "gregariousness" produced by the media is based on the same mechanisms that are constitutive of our subjectivity.

matic' attention needs to quickly identify the objects around us as sources of pleasure or danger" (Citton 2014: 63). However, these clichés are not static selection tools that we inherit and simply use as they have been transmitted. Rather, we put them to the test regularly and then help to reproduce and modify them. If, for the principle of transindividual attention, I can pay attention to something only to the extent that *we* pay attention, it is because "this mutual fund of clichés in perpetual re-elaboration conditions my ability to identify phenomena that I meet in my environment" (Citton 2014: 65).

Let us now turn to the analysis of systems of relevance in Schutz. During our exposition, we will see how different points of contact exist between the approaches just mentioned and Schutz's analysis of attention.

3. Attention and relevance

3.1 The function and role of attention in Alfred Schutz

Despite the fact that Schutz does not devote a systematic study to attention, it is still a central and recurring theme in his work. It is possible to try to identify three broad thematic areas in which attention emerges as an essential component of the argument addressed.[5] A first problem area, in which Schutz makes reference to attention, concerns the analysis of the tension of consciousness, of *attention à la vie* and the study of the constitution of meaning. The theme of attention then returns in the analysis of the transition from finite provinces of meaning and of the structure of consciousness. Finally, and this is the area that interests us most, attention is analyzed in the light of the system of relevance. Before we turn to the central theme of this essay, namely the relationship between attention and relevance, it would be good to touch briefly on the first two areas mentioned above.

As noted, in the first phase of his theoretical production, Schutz attempts to provide a more solid philosophical foundation for the comprehensive sociology of Max Weber. According to Schutz in fact, some theoretical concepts fundamental to the Weberian framework remain unexplained and need to be further examined. The same notions of comprehension (*Verstehen*) and meaning subjectively understood remain insufficiently investigated and Schutz approaches the phenomenology precisely to overcome these limitations of We-

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[5] This first schematic does not intend or claim to be exhaustive: precisely because of what we already called pervasiveness of the concept of attention it is probably possible to identify areas other than those proposed by myself.

ber's thought. The only book published while Schutz was alive, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der Sozialen Welt*, was driven precisely with this intent (Schutz 1967). At first however, Schutz believed he could tap into the thinking of Henry Bergson to provide an adequate theoretical foundation to comprehensive sociology.[6] So despite the fact that the framework of the 1932 volume was clearly phenomenological, the influence of Bergson is still visible, even if the concepts derived from the French philosopher are implanted in an entirely different structure. Then with time, the weight of Bergson in the overall economy of the Schutzian theoretical system became significantly reduced (Protti 1995: 47-73). From Bergson Schutz revisits the dual structure of the levels of consciousness: that of *durée* and that of spatialized and uniform time. In the *durée* experiences connect to each other in a continuous flow, from a now to another now, in a purely qualitative flow. The stream of consciousness in *durée* is necessarily irreflexive: the conceptual reflection instead pertains to spatialized time and the work of "cuts" in this continuous flow of itself: "In everyday life the Ego, as it acts and thinks, lives on the level of consciousness of the space-time world. Its "attention to life" (*attention à la vie*) prevents it from becoming submerged in the intuition of pure duration" (Schutz 1967: 47). Attention to life then, indicates the degree of interest in encountering reality, to face it, and therefore it is the principle that governs our power of consciousness. The highest level of attention to life corresponds to the plan of action in which the interest in encountering reality is maximum (Schutz 1945). Since the first early works, Schutz is interested in the concept of attention to life in order to emphasize the selective function: the subject acts in a world that preys upon him, that somehow imposes itself on him, and attention to life permits one to select and isolate certain objects of a perceptual field that otherwise would be potentially unlimited (Wagner 1977: 193-194).

Consequently, it is necessary that attention to life is relaxed so one can reflexively grasp the flow of consciousness. That it is possible to become aware of an experience only by turning our gaze in the direction opposite the flow. At this point, Schutz basically follows the analysis of Husserl on the turning of attention (*Zuwendung*). [7] It is that act of attention to an experience already

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[6] Three manuscripts testify of this early attempt: *Lebensformen und Sinnstruktur, Sinnstructuren der Sprache* and *Sinnstructuren der Novelle: Goethe*. For an analysis see Wagner H.R. (1977), *The Bergsonian Period of Alfred Schutz*, in «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», Vol. XXXVIII, n. 2, and Id., *Alfred Schutz: An Intellectual Biography*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, Id. (1983)..

[7] As for the extremely complex problem of attention in Husserl we will refer to the rigorous and original works of Natalie Depraz (Depraz 2004; Depraz 2014) and the interesting considerations that Fabrizio Desideri has dedicated to the subject (Desideri 2011).

passed that confers to the same experience a new status; experiences are collected, identified, while to simply live in the duration implies a continuous transition from one experience to another without them being clearly distinguished from each other. To fully understand the importance of attention in this context it is good to remember the objective of Schutz. The Austrian sociologist wants to provide a more precise and solid foundation to comprehensive sociology, and then, in particular, the problem of meaning. An experience becomes significant when it is reflexively collected thanks to the ray of light of attention: it is attention to an elapsed experience that allows it to be given a meaning: "Only from the point of view of the retrospective glance do there exist discrete experiences. Only the already experienced [*Erlebte*] is meaningful, not that which is being experienced [*Erleben*]. [...] From the point of view of passing experience, the predication of meaning is necessarily trivial, since meaning here can only be understood as the *attentive gaze* directed not at passing, but at already passed, experience" (Schutz 1967: 52 emphaisi added). Consequently, even if meaning can only refer to the predicative scope of consciousness, it is necessarily based on the prepredicative: the act of attention reveals an experience that otherwise would remain "unilluminated".[8]

As anticipated, a second area of problems concerns the interrelated themes of the passage between provinces and the structure of consciousness. The theory of finite provinces of meaning is fairly well known: Schutz picks up from William James the idea that we live in different orders of reality, but he prefers to use the term finite provinces of meaning to emphasize that it is the meaning of our experiences that delimits a province and not the ontological status of the objects. The essay *On Multiple Realities*, probably one of the best known of his theoretical works, explicitly addresses this topic. The provinces in which we live are many, Schutz cites the world of dreams, fantasy, art, religious experience, scientific contemplation, the games of children and the mentally ill, but the list could be enriched further still. The Austrian sociologist indicates that all other provinces are modifications of this intersubjective world of everyday reality, the paramount reality. The world of everyday life is the province from which we start and to which we return. In living a province, we bestow the focus of reality and in so doing we relegate the other provinces to the background. The transition between a province and another comes via a shift, subjectively perceived as a shock due to the change in tension of consciousness founded on a different attention to life. According to Schutz, at least in this essay, the transition is experienced subjectively in terms of a trauma. He returns to the theme of the pas-

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[8] For a detailed analysis of the characteristics of attention in Schutz on this theme see Perreau 2010: 83-84 (Perreau 2010: 83-84)..

sage explicitly and without significant changes in *Symbol, reality and society*, and implicitly in many other texts. The author explicitly addresses these issues in the *Introductory Notes to Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, an unfinished volume that remained unpublished until 1970, to which we will return in more detail below (Schutz 1970). In this text, the image of the shift does not fully satisfy Schutz for the fact that, on closer inspection, each activity often involves the commingling of more than one province. The same for the essay on relevance, where Schutz says it implies the unification of a number of activities each belonging to its own specific field. As noted, for Schutz consciousness always has a theme, namely that which is the focus of attention, and a horizon, that which is merely coexperienced together with the theme. The focus here seems to have the function of unifying the field of consciousness and thus allows the pre-eminence of a theme: even if in the field of perception there are several potential objects to which to direct attention "none of these perceived things is at the moment thematic for me. My attention is concentrated on a quite specific task (the analysis of the problem of relevance), and my present writing under these and those circumstances is but one among several means by which I could bring about this goal and communicate my thoughts to others" (Schutz 1970: 94). The shifting of the focus of reality to a province and the turning of attention toward a particular activity seems therefore to be the first instance of determination of the field of consciousness that at the same moment allows its unification. The preeminence of a theme becomes the element able to bring up a series of activities belonging to different provinces as a single activity which confers the focus of reality to the prevalent province: "all others receive merely the accent of derived reality – namely, they become horizonal, ancillary, subordinate in relation to what is the prevailing theme"(Schutz 1970: 98). Although, in fact, the subject confers the focus of reality to a province, on closer inspection all the other activities involve us to varying degrees and so we pay some form of attention to them. Schutz therefore concludes the vision of the passage between the provinces through a leap is revealed to be "an oversimplifiation" (Schutz 1970: 14): we live simultaneously in many provinces. As evidence of the close relationship that ties the theme of attention with that of consciousness, Schutz feels the need at this point to make two assumptions about subjectivity that take into account the fact that we live simultaneously in different provinces. According to the schizophrenic-ego hypothesis we can perform some typical or semiautomatic activities that involve only superficial levels of our personality and we can do it even when a particularly moving event has altered the deepest levels of our personality. Although we can give our full attention to routine activities, we still haven't abandoned the issue of the deeper level. But not even this metaphor fully satisfies Schutz, who aimed to introduce an additional image borrowed from music. The relationship that exists between two themes that run simultaneously in the same stream of

consciousness is similar to that of the counterpoint: two themes flow simultaneously and "listener's mind" can pay full attention now to one, now to another topic, but continues to flow independently.

All these problems are, however, according to Schutz, expressions of a single fundamental phenomenon whose analysis brings us precisely to the specific theme of this essay: "Living simultaneously in various realms of reality, in various tensions of consciousness and modes of attention à la vie, in various dimensions of time, putting into play different levels of our personality (or different degrees of anonymity and intimacy), the counterpointal articulation of the themes and horizons pertaining to each of such levels (including finally the schizophrenic patterns of the ego) are all *expressions of the single basic phenomenon: the interplay of relevance structures*" (Schutz 1970: 100-101). The phenomenon of relevance for Schutz is therefore placed at a more radical level than the others. Through the concept of relevance he wants to give an account of the methods and norms that guide attention. The subject in fact is not completely free to direct attention at any object available in his/her perceptive and conceptual field, there are limits, conditions, paths that we must follow: "Husserl has investigated the functions of what he calls the "attentional ray" for the constitution of the thematic kernel and therewith for the structurization of the whole field. At any moment there are many experiences going on simultaneously. What constitutes one (or better, one strain) of these temporally ongoing and simultaneous experiences as the thematic one is the fact that I voluntarily turn to it or reflect upon it (and hence this is an ego-activity, insofar as the ego is the source of all the activities of my conscious life). *Husserl's description of this activity may lead to the misconception that this selection, this choice, may be performed at random within an unlimited range of freedom or discretion*" (Schutz 1970: 95 emphasis added). The decision to direct one's attention to certain themes, to focus attention on some objects and to relegate others to the background, takes place in a narrow range of discretion. These acts of selection, continues Schutz, have their own history and are interconnected: modes of relevance are in fact organized into systems. The systems of relevance are the "engines" of selective activity (Muzzetto 2006: 164), they determine the regulative principles of construction of reality over consciousness and experience of objects, events and relationships (Nasu 2008: 92). The systems of relevance are thus the matrices, socially derived and socially conditioned, which guide the attention and therefore the selection of useful elements to subjects to define and manage the situation in which they are immersed.

3.2 The Theory of Systems of Relevance

Before addressing in detail the analysis of Schutz's systems of relevance it is appropriate to clarify the role of this concept in the overall theoretical system

of the Austrian sociologist. As we just mentioned, the concept of relevance is placed at a level of depth that permit us to treat all the other themes which have occupied Schutz. If it is certainly true that in light of the systems of relevance, attention emerges above all in its operational component (Perreau 2010), as an essential element for action and reflection in the world of everyday life. But it is also equally true that one must be cautious in attributing this new setting to the influence of the new American intellectual environment and in particular to pragmatism. I do not think it is entirely correct to establish a contrast between a European and an American period. According to this approach, in the period before his migration attention is analyzed mainly in its active and reflexive dimension, like the spotlight that can illuminate an experience. Following his migration, instead attention is detected especially in relation to a wholly grounded subject in the world of everyday life. In this second moment attention would then be analyzed mainly in the passive dimension and in relation to its role in the constitution of the world *taken for granted*.

However, I believe that this change is all inside the original development of the phenomenological path of Schutz. A path that has been enriched thanks to the contributions of American authors, namely James and Mead, but that has maintained a substantial coherence (Luckmann 1973). There definitely exists a change of focus or perhaps rather of setting in analyzing the role of attention, but this change should be framed within the complex relationship between transcendental phenomenology and phenomenology of the natural attitude in the thought of Schutz[9] and particularly to the gradual self-autonomy of analysis of the mundane sphere. The world of everyday life is imposed progressively more and more as a privileged place of phenomenological analysis to the point at which Schutz in last phase of his life saw fit to proceed solely on the ground of mundane phenomenology (Letter to Gurvitsch of 22.3.1957 in Grathoff 1989).

Therefore along this path the life-world in its everyday social dimension acquires an increasing role but the fact remains that some problems were well presented even before Schutz had reduced the role of transcendental phenomenology. Precisely for this reason it is possible to identify different references to some central questions of the problem of relevance across the theoretical production of Schutz and particularly in the works before emigration. Among the questions raised in this period, in fact, some of the issues that Schutz faces in the following years are already present in embryonic form. Especially the

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[9] The analysis of this particularly delicate and complex problem certainly can not be developed here. For a detailed analysis see Wagner (Wagner 1983: 287-328) and Muzzetto (Muzzetto 1997: 23-69).

idea that selective attention can be read in terms of relevance to everyday life; a relevance guided by interest. Another manuscript then, that Wagner places between 1927 and 1928, is explicitly dedicated to relevance. The text, entitled *Relevanz* (Schutz 1927), is of utmost importance because it testifies to the transition from the Bergson period to that one more strictly phenomenological. Here Schutz is very clear in stating how the problem of relevance selects from the totality of a pre-existing world, an old problem in philosophy, which regards the social sciences, but is of vital importance in everyday life: "The concept of relevance is the central concept of sociology and of the cultural sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*]. However, the basic phenomenon of relevance reaches beyond them into every life; it permeates our existing, our living and cognizing experience" (Schutz 1927: 3). In *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, then, the attentional modifications are analyzed in detail in paragraph 13 in relation to the constitution of meaning. And here, we have already said, attention is studied in relation to reflection and thus regards its active dimension. Yet, in the same text, the concept of relevance is revisited multiple times and in the concluding section, "A Glance at Further Problems", Schutz affirms that among the issues to be addressed is certainly "the *whole problem of relevance*, which has kept cropping up again and again in the present study. The definitive clarification of this problem will be possible only through an over-all phenomenological analysis, which nevertheless can be begun within the field of the social sciences" (Schutz 1967: 249). The central role is thus recognized, but the systematic treatment is postponed to a later date. Schutz follows this same strategy in many other later essays: even when explicitly dealing with certain aspects of the problem, he does not fail to specify how in reality it is a far more complex issue that deserves more space and a more detailed analysis. The Austrian sociologist tries this analysis only in *The Problem of Relevance*, a book that, as we have said, remained unfinished and was published in 1970, eleven years after his death. It is unclear why the planned book on relevance was not completed. On the other hand, these tormented pages (Protti 2001), although provisional and incomplete, represent the main source for studies on the concept of relevance in Schutz. Even as the project was abandoned, interest in the issue has not waned. In the following essays, the author continued to make reference to the subject and devoted a substantial part of *The Structure of the Life World* to it.

If we look at the overall production of Schutz the problem of relevance meets a strange fate. In fact it seems the role of the concept of relevance in Schutz is similar to that of attention in Husserl: both are as central as they are hidden in the theoretical architecture of the two authors (Depraz 2004: 5; Depraz 2014). This is especially true if we look at the work that Schutz published while he was still alive: the concept of relevance seems a sort of thread

that emerges only partially in published essays until 1959, the year of Schutz's death. Yet, this concept can in fact be considered a sort of base concept of the whole concept of the social (Natanson 1986) that, according to Nasu, is present in all the works of the Austrian sociologist and that connects them with each other (Nasu 2008: 91). So let's now analyze the systems of relevance, particularly in relation to the problem of attention.

3.3 Systems of Relevance

The systems of relevance, we have already said, can be seen as the social matrix within which the individual attention operates. These determine both the form and the content of our stream of consciousness (Schutz 1945: 213) and, as a consequence, indicate what pertains to the situation with which the individual must come to terms (Schutz 1950: 284). As Nasu effectively wrote: "relevance is a regulative principle of reality construction in the sense that it is a regulative principle of knowing and experiencing objects, events, and, in turn, the subject, as well as a regulative principle for defining the situation" (Nasu 2008: 93). Schutz however does not begin with a general definition of the systems of relevance to then investigate the different types. At the outset of his study on relevance, the author resumes briefly the theory of perception as choice of Jankélévitch, that of the problematic possibility of Husserl and the theory of choice of Bergson. According to Schutz, however, the more complete description of the phenomenon was given by the skeptic Carneades with his theory of verisimilitude. The exploration of the theme of relevance, is therefore carried out on the basis of the example of Carneades: a man in winter enters a dimly lit room and his attention is immediately drawn to an object in the corner; the man is undecided: it is a snake or a coil of rope? Schutz chooses to frame the attention and relevance from a sample taken from an everyday situation. Already this is an indication of the path he wants to follow: the attention it is not a theme for his role in the reflection, but as a guide for the operation of our systems of exploration and management of the situation with which the subject has to come to terms.

In any case, what interests Schutz is that all these authors cited recognize that within the field of consciousness there are a number of objects that compete for our attention: "Still, all of these theories – those of Carneades, Husserl, Bergson, Jankelevitch – have in common the assumption that within the given field of our consciousness, several configurations (perceptual or fancied or otherwise) compete with one another for our interpretive assent. They compete in the manner of problematic possibilities or alternatives: each has a certain appeal to us, each has its particular weight, each is capable of being connected with previous experiences, at least as to the type inherent

to them" (Schutz 1970: 105). It is the absence of the problem of the alternative that Schutz criticizes the Gestaltists: who don't explain why, among the different possible configurations, just this Gestalt configuration is privileged over another. Or put another way, every Gestalt already presupposes a choice between problematic possibilities, or alternative interpretations of the same object of perception. In the form of a question: why among the many objects present in my own field of perception does this object catch my eye? And why among the many possible alternatives am I undecided between a coil of rope and a snake? Obviously Schutz tries to answer these questions with the theory of systems of relevance.

3.3.1 Thematic relevance

Schutz identifies three systems of relevance: thematic, interpretative and motivational. The distinction is purely analytic and proposed for heuristic purposes: in everyday reality the process is completely unified and the boundaries between the three systems of relevance are difficult to separate. But on this point we will return later; we begin now by addressing the systems individually. Schutz distinguishes between imposed thematic relevance and intrinsic thematic relevance. We see the first characterization that provides us with examples of imposed thematic relevance: "This is the *first form* of relevance: namely, that by virtue of which something is constituted as problematic in the midst of the unstructuralized field of unproblematic familiarity – and therewith the field into theme and horizon. We shall call this kind *topical relevance*. It is worthwhile to note parenthetically the fact that the Greek root of the term "problem" is equivalent to its meaning to the Latin root of the term "object." The original meaning of both is "that which is thrown before me. [...] to make an object a problem, to make it the theme or topic of our thought, means nothing else than to conceive it as a dubious and questionable one, to segregate it from the background of unquestionable and unquestioned familiarity which is simply taken for granted" (Schutz 1970: 107). That which attracts the attention of the subject is what breaks the expectations, that is the object that cannot be brought back automatically to the type of things that, on the basis of knowledge sedimented in its own foundation of experience, he expects to find in that given environment. The relevancies are imposed because it is the unusual, unfamiliar experience that forces us to pay attention precisely because of its strangeness (Schutz 1970: 108). The thematic relevancies imposed thus concern the experiences that are not subject to making themes through an act of will. Schutz refers not only to unexpected and unfamiliar experiences as we've just seen, but also to other forms of imposed relevance, like the involuntary passages of the province or changes in the level of personality involved.

The author does not address in detail the different ways, but they all seem to implicate a certain thematic and cognitive discontinuity, or a discontinuity between the theme that occupied the consciousness before the onset of a new theme unrelated to the former. In fact, in an attempt to identify a general characterization of imposed thematic relevance, Schutz writes that "any interruption or modification which necessitates discontinuing the idealizations of 'and so on' and 'again and again,' which are at the root of all our experience, created imposed topical relevances" (Schutz 1970: 109).

The intrinsic thematic relevancies, however, concern those cases of voluntary change of theme and that Schutz explicitly connects to the phenomenon known in psychology as voluntary attention. The sociologist distinguishes two cases of voluntary displacement of attention: the transition to the new theme can be done gradually by expanding or deepening the theme of departure, or by the voluntary changing of attention towards a theme that has no connection with the theme of departure. Especially in the latter case, the distinction between imposed and voluntary is thin and appears to relate to the presence or absence of motivation. As a result Schutz focuses on the first category and is sure to revisit how these remain ideal-typical distinctions: it is not possible to find them in concrete reality in their pure form.

The choice of the expression "intrinsic relevance" associated to voluntary seems however to want to emphasize that the voluntary nature does not mean full discretion. Although Schutz in the text on relevance is not entirely clear on this point (remember they are still notes), the two sub-categories identified seem to corroborate this hypothesis. We have just seen how they can give two cases of voluntary thematic relevance: extension of the theme of departure and identification of a new theme. The first case is easily distinguishable from imposed relevance that involves a thematic and cognitive discontinuity: the extension of the theme is to the contrary characterized by a continuation of the theme of departure. In this sense it is an "intrinsic" relevance to the theme; this means that an established theme of departure does not have full and complete discretion to further thematizations. As for the case of voluntary identification of a new theme, the situation is more complex since a discontinuity exists. The latter however, is a limiting case for Schutz (Muzzetto 2006: 172). The distinction between imposed and intrinsic seems to concern the existence of a motivation to change attention. In any case, that which we want to emphasize is that the reference of Schutz to motivation serves to clarify that also in the case of voluntary attention there exists a direction and limits (also these are social in nature). Schutz, on one hand, is reluctant to associate voluntary attention to full discretion but, at the same time, tries to safeguard subjective autonomy: *"by the establishment of the paramount theme as home base both the direction of the intrinsic relevances leading into the horizon and the limit up to which*

they must be followed are to a certain extent already constituted. To be sure a voluntary act is needed to perform this translation of horizonal material into topical terms, but this freedom is limited" (Schutz 1970: 112).

3.3.2 Interpretative relevance

Once an object has attracted attention it must be interpreted, and it is here that interpretative relevance comes into play. For Schutz, to interpret a phenomenon means to bring it back to its typicality under other previous typical experiences. However not all sedimented experiences are useful in this process, but only those relevant to the thematic object for the subject. The systems of interpretive relevance thus serve to select those experiences that should be revisited for the interpretation of the object, but also which aspects of the object are relevant for interpretation: "This kind of relevance reveals, however, *a curious double function. Not only is it interpretatively relevant that part of our stock of knowledge at hand has "something to do" with the thematic object now given to our interpretation; but,* by a single stroke, *certain particular moments of the object perceived obtain the character of major or minor interpretative relevance for the task of recognizing and interpreting the actually experienced segment of the world."* (Schutz 1970: 113). This operation, of comparison between the percept and the material previously experienced, is often performed at the prepredicative level, through what Husserl calls *passive synthesis of recognition.* In this way, the percept, which has a certain shape range and color, is associated "with the recollection of previous perceptions of corporeal objects having typically similar, like, or same shape, extension, color, and so on" (ibid.). Therefore, most of the processes of interpretation takes place at this level without the aid of the sphere of judgment. It is on this basis that Schutz makes the distinction between imposed interpretative relevance and those intrinsic. The imposed relevances are such because they remain at the level of passive syntheses: the object is automatically brought back to the same objects or those typically similar to ones previously experienced and the knowledge of this object is adequate to come to terms with the situation (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 200). Just because it does not reach the level of awareness, this relevance is according to Schutz imposed. Therefore, most of the objects that do not attract my attention, remain in the background because they are automatically led back to the already known. The intrinsic relevances come into play when the level to be involved is predicative. If the guaranteed automatic interpretation of passive synthesis is not sufficient or is not adequate, then it is necessary to resort to voluntarism. It is thus the case of the problematic possibility, for which an act of self-will is necessary that thematizes intrinsic aspects of the dominant theme. If I therefore should interpret an object that caught my attention, I have to voluntarily move my attention to

other aspects or objects that are associated with this theme. As for the intrinsic thematic relevances, Schutz specifies that even they have limits. To return to our example, Schutz says, the man who enters the room is undecided whether to interpret the object that attracts his attention as a snake or a rope, but he doesn't ask himself whether the object can be a dog: *"The system of interpretative relevances is founded, in short, upon the principle of compatibility* – or, as Leibniz would call it, of compossibility – *of all of its coexistent moments.* And for this very reason the volitional acts which supervene in establishing additional intrinsic interpretative relevances are limited in scope (not everyone is freely available), as are the acts establishing intrinsic topical relevances"(Schutz 1970).

To introduce the motivational relevances, we can mention a theme that we will deal with more fully later. Schutz makes reference to interest both at the conclusion of the analysis of thematic relevances as well as to that of interpretive relevances. We have seen that something is the object of our attention and therefore needs to be interpreted by its strangeness, its non-familiarity. We need to make it familiar. But what determines the level of familiarity necessary? In principle it is possible to penetrate indefinitely the exterior and interior horizons of a theme. According to Schutz it is "a set of current interests" of the subject that determines the degree of familiarity sufficient: that is, it is only based on the interest that we can distinguish the portion of the world that needs further investigation and with which we want to familiarize ourselves, from that which can be taken for granted and therefore remain in the background. In turn however, the current interest *"is itself a form of relevance"* (Schutz 1970: 118) and to its analysis we will dedicate the next section. For now it is sufficient to note how the systems cannot be treated separately: when Schutz analyzes a system he must necessarily refer to the others.

3.3.3 Motivational relevance

Let's return to the case of problematic possibilities and to our example of the man who enters a room and is undecided whether to interpret the object that caught his attention as a snake or a rope. If he has no further interpretive elements to establish with a sufficient degree of probability what the object in the corner is, he may decide to continue the process of interpretation and hit it with a stick. In this way, he would obtain additional interpretative material to resolve his dilemma. The man, that is, can not remain in a situation of doubt because the solution to the dilemma (rope or snake?) is relevant to his future conduct. The motivational relevance indicates that "what has to be done is motivated by that for which it is to be done, the latter being motivationally relevant for the former. It is a chain of interrelated motivational

relevances which leads to the decision concerning how I must act" (Schutz 1970: 119-120). However, Schutz warned immediately, this formula is not entirely clear: the interpretative decision (to clarify whether it is a snake or a rope) motivates the action to hit with the stick; in turn however it is the end of this action (to avoid danger) that motivates the interpretive process (or the acquisition of other relevant elements of interpretation). There is thus an ambiguity that must be clarified between motivating and motivated experiences. To this end, Schutz distinguishes between "in order to" and "because" motives. The first refers to the planned end of the action, namely to the state of things that the subject intends to realize through the action taken. The imagined end of the action in turn motivates the single operations to be done to realize the state of things planned. So in order to remove the danger the man has intension to take a stick for striking the object. We can express the same concept through a language formula equivalent if, instead of asking ourselves at the moment that precedes the action, we look at the moment that follows the beginning of the action: the man took the stick because of the fact that he wanted to hit the object. These two forms are equivalent and thus for Schutz we are still faced with motives such as "in order to": "in both the state of affairs to be brought about, the paramount project, motivates the single steps to be taken. In other words, the paramount project is motivationally relevant for the projecting of the single steps; the single steps to be performed are, however, "causally relevant" for bringing about the desired result"(Schutz 1970: 121). So if we express this kind of motive through the formulation "because of" we are facing the "*spurious* because sentences" (Schutz 1970: 121).

The second form of motives is instead that of the genuine motive because. These have a different nature and concern the motives that underlie the determination of the dominant project. In our example, if the motive *in order to* of the action is to remove the snake, as the end of the action, the motive *because*, which is behind this end, is the fear of snakes. The genuine because motives are therefore substantially different because they sink their roots into the experience sedimented in the foundation of knowledge and are not entirely available to the subject. Every because motive "has its autobiographical history as well, referring to many series of previously experienced relevances – topical, interpretational, and motivational ones which now 'subconsciously' stir the tension of my consciousness and determine the intimacy of the level of personality involved" (Schutz 1970: 122). The genuine because motives are not necessarily subject to the conscience. They are presented as a habitual possession constituted by a series of typical expectations present in neutralized form, but potentially actualizable when certain typical circumstances are verified. It is then this habitual possession

that activates the predominant project, present in its typical form at the bottom of consciousness.[10]

We can note, as we did before, how Schutz should refer to the other systems of relevance in the analysis of a system taken separately. Before addressing the problem of the relationship between systems, which will be the subject of the next section, we must clarify the distinction between intrinsic relevances and those imposed for the motivational relevances as well. Only the choice of the predominant project is an intrinsic motivational relevance, because only this choice is derived on a voluntary act. After having made the choice of the dominant project to be realized, all other motivational relevances will be experienced as imposed.

3.3.4 Interrelation between systems of relevance

The different systems of relevance are mutually distinguishable, but not separable. We've seen during the course of our exposition: Schutz distinguishes three different systems and when he analyzes them individually he still must refer to the others. Every rupture between the systems is completely artificial. They show a "genuine *interdependency*" (Cox 1978: 91). They are therefore experienced by the subject in their absolute indivisibility; only the reflexive gaze can break them down. In everyday life that which is the theme is the "topic at hand", not the because reasons of the action or the systems of relevance. Obviously, according to Schutz, even the systems of relevance can become thematic: we can ask ourselves why that object caught our attention, if our hierarchies are correct, and so on. Just as aspects of a single phenomenon, it is possible to choose any one of the systems of relevance as a starting point for the analysis.

We have already had occasion to note, when something catches our attention it becomes thematic for us, becomes a problem, a question emerges from the background of objects simply taken for granted. In this sense, that which draws attention and that which starts the interpretive process is not familiar. Familiarity therefore has a subjective meaning that depends both on the biography of the subject and on actual circumstances. When we encounter an unusual experience "What emerges as a strange experience, then, needs to be investigated, *if it is interesting enough*, because of its very unfamiliarity. It has become questionable. And there with new topical relevances arise" (Schutz 1970: 132). It is the current interest that depends on the biographical and

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[10] The structure of because motives is highly complex and cannot be analyzed in detail here. For further reading see Muzzetto (Muzzetto 2006: 186-226).

current circumstances which determines the level of investigation necessary, or put differently, how long an object is worthy of attention. But Schutz asks, what then is interest? At this point it should not be difficult to answer in terms of motivational relevances: *"Interest in this sense is the set of motivational relevances which guide the selective activity of my mind.* These relevances may be either actually operating when I turn to an "intrinsic topic," or they may be present as the sediment of relevances which were formerly actually operative in a neutralized form, namely as habitual possessions of my stock of knowledge" (Schutz 1970: 127-130). In this case, the author points out, there is a dual, bidirectional relationship between thematic and motivational relevances: the interest stimulated by the unusual experience generates new thematic relevances; these new thematic relevances in turn can be the source for new motivational relevances: something that did not interest me, now attracts my attention and I can want to familiarize myself with it. This situation in turn, can only change the system of interpretative relevance, "those which bear 'subscripts' as regards the main topic prevailing thus far. On the other hand, it is quite possible that a shift in the system of interpretational relevances – as with the introduction of a new concept – becomes the starting point for building up a set of new motivational or topical relevances which do not thus far pertain to the familiar stock of knowledge at hand" (Schutz 1970: 133). Therefore, it is not possible to attribute a priority to one of the systems of relevance: the process is unified and therefore each system can become the starting point from which originate the changes in the other two.

4. Systems of relevance as social matrix of attention

Now that we have reassumed the theory of relevances in Schutz, we can investigate the relationship between attention and relevance to show precisely the social nature of attention. First we must try to resolve an apparent contradiction. In *Reflections* Schutz writes that "The most critical omission made thus far refers to the fact that we have handled our problem – and will in this and the following part continue to do so – as if there were no social world at all, as if an isolated individual experienced the world of nature disconnected from his fellowmen" (Schutz 1970: 135). Does this means that for Schutz the idea of an isolated subject is somehow possible? If it were so, Schutz would not come out from the individualistic approach to attention. We must therefore clarify this aspect.

We must first make note of the fact that Schutz moves within a noetic analysis of consciousness and this necessarily influences his vision of attention as well. As noted, the noesi designates the experience of the object while the

noema is the object-as-experienced. This point is very important for the implications that this choice entails: in following this perspective, attention has been studied mainly in relation to the subjective experiences sedimented in personal history. The interests and the biography of the actor function as constituent elements of his attention. Quite different instead is the approach of his friend and colleague Aron Gurwitsch, who follows the noematic perspective. Gurwitsch is interested in a theory of relevances as theme-relevance while Schutz in a theory of ego-relevances: "With Schutz *a certain item is relevant to me* on account of the projects and pursuits which engage me. As we use the term relevancy, *a certain item* is said to be *relevant to the theme* (which may well be a plan of action or a pursuit) and also to other items because of their relevancy to the theme" (Gurwitsch 2010:333)[11]. Embree believes the two analyzes compatible (Embree 1977) and proposes to carefully read the difference departing from the diagram ego-cogito-cogitatum: Schutz is focused on the first part (Ego-cogito) and Gurwitsch on the second (Cogito-cogitatum). Therefore in following Schutz, subjective interest is necessarily emphasized as an element that "colors" the objects for their greater or lesser ability to attract attention. Interests as we have seen, must be understood in a broad sense, to include fears and hopes, experiences sedimented at different levels of one's personality. Due to the noetic approach, the biography of the subject thus has a key role in understanding the functioning of attention. The sociologist then is interested above all on the basis with which structure is determined in theme and horizon. However this does not mean that the analysis of Schutz remain caged within exclusively subjectivist explanations.

The omission of sociality primarily has the function of simplifying the problem treated in the analysis. The option for methodological individualism implies that Schutz always starts from a subject that may possibly relate to another subject. However this doesn't at all mean that the social dimension isn't present. In *The Phenomenology of the Social World* Schutz is already very clear on the fact that the reality of the You and the We precedes even the ego as mine. This means that the experience of us that is given in the We-relation, in which the self and the other are physically present and interacting, is a primary pre-predicative experience and "that it is only after that relationship is established that individuals are born into the world, even phenomenologist" (Natanson 1978: 70). Intersubjectivity is the foundation of all other human categories: "As long as man is born of woman, intersubjectivity

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[11] This is not the place to analyze the interesting theory developed by Gurwitsch in *The Field of Consciousness*, written at the same time as *The Problem of Relevance* during the period of greatest collaboration between the authors. For a recent development of Gurwitsch's theory we refer to the work that Arvidson has continued over the years particularly (Arvidson 2006).

and the We-relationship will be the foundation for all other categories of human existence" (Schutz 1957: 82). In the mundane sphere intersubjectivity is taken for granted, yet it is constitutively present: the world is common to most subjects and so my experience of it always refers to others. There is no subject in which society is not always present: society is an integral part of the individual (Schutz 1942). "Sociality, in these terms – writes Maurice Natanson – is the *always* already existent milieu of man related to fellow man in multiform temporal, spatial, corporeal, *as well as cognitive and emotional terms*" (Natanson 1977: 110 emphaisis added).

Thus if the subject is always in society, and the choice of starting from an isolated subject has a heuristic function, any opposition between individual and collective is forced in the case of Schutz (Embree 1991: 210). The Austrian sociologist categorically excludes the idea of a private experience. On this point he is very clear in his letter to Gurwitsch of April 20, 1952 "I had of course only pedagogical reasons for taking a theoretical solipsistic ego as my point of departure and only subsequently introducing the structures which are involved in the social world. But that of course doesn't mean that I believe that a *private experience that is not socialized from the beginning is possible*" (Grathoff 1989: 177). We have also seen that sociality is always present at the cognitive level. If we also extend these considerations to the subject of attention, we must note that the treatment that provides an isolated subject that directs its attention towards an object is in fact a simplification. Therefore we can try to locate the first stable reference point of attention in Schutz, in connection with the framework that we have taken up in the second section. As it is for Eviatar Zerubavel and for Yves Citton, for Schutz attention is always socialized from the start. Attention is indeed an eminently social phenomenon.

We go even further in detail and see in what sense is it possible to identify the social dimension of attention in Schutz's analysis of systems of relevance. First we will clarify the role of the systems of relevance within the stock of knowledge of the individual and then point out the role of the social in the concrete functioning of the systems of relevance.

The description of Schutz's life-world always starts from the assumption that it is an intersubjective world and thus a social world. Every subject, to come to terms with this world, to interpret it and act in it, has available a stock of knowledge that is the result of the sedimentation of their previous experience. These are derived either from direct experience or from experiences transmitted to the subject by others (peers, teachers, parents, and so on) (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 7). The stock of knowledge however does not consist merely of a necessarily explicit knowledge, it's not propositional and is in fact intersubjective (Banega 2014). Although it has a certain unity, the stock is not an integrated and coherent system.

Knowledge for Schutz is socially derived and socially distributed. The stock of knowledge has a intersubjective genesis: this means that a large part of the expectations and subjective values are learned and inherited from others and that, consequently, only a very small part of my knowledge comes from direct experience (Schutz 1953: 13-14; Schutz 1976: 133-134). But not only: because the direct experiences are not private experiences (a hypothesis that, as we have seen, Schutz excludes) they are always socially mediated. In *The Well-informed Citizen* Schutz explains in detail what it means to say that the world is a common intersubjective world of culture: personal knowledge is in reference to that of the others and comes to us as an inheritance; it refers to a single world common to us all; and this world is subject to confirmation by the others (Schutz 1946).

Since the systems of relevance are also the result of sedimented experiences, they are a part of the stock of knowledge. However at the same time, they have a special position within the stock: they belong to it and they constitute somehow its structure because they order the various elements based on the importance and appropriateness of typical situations. The systems of relevance represent the "driving force" (Hermida-Lazcano 2009) of the stock of knowledge: they govern its dynamics and its use. The stock of knowledge, that is, cannot be understood in static terms, like a warehouse from which the subject simply draws; it is not the subject of mere possession (Nasu 2008: 98). It is rather a flow that changes in the structure based on the specific situation: "It has to be constituted on each occasion according to the prevailing system of relevance" (Nasu 2006: 392). Consequently as a rule, the stock of knowledge is always unfinished and open: the acquisition of knowledge is never definitive, the problem always emerges within what is taken for granted. Each knowledge taken for granted is always subject to "new announcement" and always with respect to an end. For if the interpretation consists of the attribution of that which we have in front of us that is already noted, we can not fail to highlight the circularity of the process: the new experience feeds back on the stock of available knowledge (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 161; Muzzetto 2006: 63). The system of relevance then regulates both the appropriateness of knowledge with respect to the concrete situation, as well as the importance of the new experience with respect to the stock as a whole and to the same system.

Therefore, since they are a part of the stock of knowledge, the systems of relevance are also socially derived and socially distributed. Thus the ways in which we pay attention to objects based on the specific situation are, in large part, socially derived. This approach also enables Schutz to escape the risk of sociological determinism. Because, although it is certainly true that the systems of relevance are mostly socially derived, it is also equally true that it is impossible that the systems of relevance are identical to its subjects. The systems of relevance

in fact depend ultimately on the personal history of the subject and since there cannot be two identical biographies, there can be no systems of relevance that perfectly overlap. The systems of relevance then, are socially distributed. As a result, not all social groups share the same matrix that guides attention. Schutz hasn't particularly deepened these aspects, but we find an important indication in his essay on the stranger. The stranger has a hard time coming to terms with the new environment, not sharing the same system of relevance of the society in which he finds himself, he pays attention to elements the host group takes for granted. At the same time, he doesn't pay attention to other elements that for the group are of vital importance. Ultimately, since he doesn't have the same system of relevance, he has trouble identifying the pre-established alternatives for the appropriate definition of the situation (Nasu 2006).

The systems of relevance are socially derived and socially distributed. As for the former, we can say that the matrix that guides our attention has a social origin. The second aspect reminds us instead that not all groups and subjects share the same systems of relevance. Let us now move on to analyze the specific working methods of the systems of relevance.

We have seen that an object[12] draws our attention when it becomes a problem for us. Whether it requires our attention, or whether that attention is driven by a voluntary act,[13] this object becomes problematic for us and we have to familiarize ourselves with it. That familiarity is however a very complex concept. The familiarity of an object cannot be understood in an absolute sense, as if it belonged to the ontological structure of the object. As we saw when we discussed Zerubavel, an object stands out like a figure in a background based on social norms. Similarly for Schutz, familiarity cannot be understood in an absolute sense for at least two reasons, which we've already discussed in previous pages. On the one hand something catches my attention depending on my current interest, which in turn depends both on the specific situation and on those experiences sedimented in my biography. On the other, the object that captures me is also that which is not within the typical expectations of the situation. But what does it mean to say that an experience is not within typical expectations? And how are these expectations built?

A characteristic of our habitually acquired knowledge consists in the fact that it typically refers to other potentially similar knowledge. Obviously, we

[12] Throughout our essay we followed Schutz and have always talked about *a* theme present in consciousness. Of course this is a simplification, as Schutz has well presented. A theme is always inserted into a system, is always connected to a network of other themes that are related with it.

[13] Again for the sake of clarity, as for Schutz, voluntariness does not correspond absolutely to the full discretionary power. The feelings that guide our will also have a social origin.

constantly experience a certain atypicality compared to what we typically anticipate. An experience is therefore always unusual compared with the expectations built on the basis of typically accumulated knowledge: "It is precisely this 'not so but otherwise' which gives the new experience the character of being an unfamiliar one" (Schutz 1970: 132). These expectations however, even though they depend on my biography, have an eminently social nature.

The world is, according to Schutz, experienced from the beginning according to types. This implies that for the natural attitude, the world makes sense, is pre-ordained, is not merely an aggregate of disordered sensations (Schutz 1945: 208). It also means that each typification brings with it expectations, or the ability to repeat at least in principle similar experiences: "The unquestioned pre-experiences are, however, also from the outset, at hand as typical, that is, as carrying open horizons of anticipated similar experiences. For example, the outer world is not experienced as an arrangement of individual unique objects, dispersed in space and time, but as "mountains," "trees," "animals," "fellow-men" (Schutz 1953: 7-8). Typification is therefore an important part of the social and cultural world: this means that as typifications certainly vary between cultures, there can not exist a cultural world that faces less typification. As clearly stated by Barber: "Hence, typification, that is, typified ways of conceiving the world and typified patterns of behavior, will vary from one social world, or cultures, to another, but it is necessarily the case that if there is a socio-cultural world, then people will function within it by employing *some* set of typifications" (Barber 1987: 117). On the other hand, typification is essentially social, that is, socially shared, derived, transmitted and constantly rebuilt. Barber masterfully sums up: "For Schutz the social character of typification is invariant and essential such that there cannot be typification which do not reflect the social milieu out of which they originate and in which they are utilized. The social is not just accidentally affixed to necessary structures of typification whenever they are concretely instantiated, but it is intrinsically necessary to every life-world typification pattern" (Barber 1987: 118 emphasis added). The language of common sense represents " the epitome of the typifications socially approved by the linguistic group" (Schutz 1955: 233). So for Zerubavel and Citton, as well as for Schutz the language guides and prestructures, predominantly at the prepredicative level, our perception and attention. Typification thus becomes one of the ways through which the cognitive organization of the world is socially transmitted.

Therefore, if interests guide the level of knowledge required to gain respect from the situation and the interpretation of the world is always done in terms of types, according to Schutz there can be no such thing as a pure and simple type: they always originate from problems of the group. The socially approved typifications, that constitute the systems of relevance, originate in com-

mon situations and in collective problems: "the world taken for granted by the in-group is a world of a common situation within which common problems emerges within a common horizon, problems requiring typical solutions by typical means for bringing about typical ends." (Schutz 1955: 236) The expectations of the subject, even if they come from direct experience, still originate within the scope of typifications of the membership group. Let's take a page from Schutz in which he summarizes some of the issues we tried to analyze in this section: "The socially approved system of typifications and relevances is the common field within which the private typifications and relevance structures of the individual members of the group originate. This is so, because the private situation of the individual as defined by him is always a situation within the group, his private interests are interests with reference to those of the group (whether by way of particularization or antagonism), his private problems are necessarily in a context with the group's problems" (Schutz 1955: 238).

Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to highlight the contribution that the theory of systems of relevance of Alfred Schutz can offer to the understanding of the social dimension of attention. I have therefore briefly revisited some recent contributions that explicitly investigate intersubjective and collective attention, and we focused in particular on the proposals of Eviatar Zerubavel and Yves Citton. I then analyzed the role of attention in the theoretical edifice of Schutz, to focus on the relationship between attention and systems of relevance in particular. I then tried to stress the importance of the mechanisms of social regulation of attention, with respect to both the origin of the systems of relevance as well as to their operation. Regarding the first aspect, I noted how for Schutz the systems of relevance are socially derived and distributed and are formed from sedimented experiences. With regard to their operation, I attempted to emphasize the elements of interest and social typification.

One of the great merits of the theory of relevance in Schutz is, as Laurent Perreau writes, in allowing attention to emerge as "an activity of consciousness in direct contact with our practical enrollment in the world" (Perreau 2012, 80). At the same time, the theory of systems of relevance provides the opportunity to read attention starting with the subject, but without tying it exclusively to a determinist theory of action or based solely on motives. Hermida-Lazcano for example, (Hermida-Lazcano 2009) sees the theory of relevance as an antidote to hyperrationalist theories of action for three main reasons: its relative concealment of projects in the consciousness, the plurality of roles, and the problem of multiple realities and the schizophrenic ego.

Exporting these considerations to the subject of attention, we can say that for its relative concealment of projects my attention can also be drawn by objects without me fully understanding why. Perhaps for this reason it is important to reflect on the mechanisms through which we manage our attention, both individually and collectively. In an overstimulated environment it is crucial to cultivate our "reflexive" or "critical" attention (Citton 2014). Or to put it in Schutzian terms, it is essential that our systems of relevance are set to a theme.

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